



Dr. Sally

Service Members with PTSD Find A Brighter Future with Service Dogs

by Samantha L. Quigley

Buf and Sally had been wandering the Walmart parking lot near Fort Stewart, Georgia, for about 20 minutes. Every so often Sally would shoot Buf a look as if to ask, "Are we actually going to go in the store or are we just going to wander around all day?"

As much as she wanted to get going, she knew better than to push him. Crowded stores weren't Buf's thing. Frankly, they terrified him. But then again, that's what she was there for - to help him do things he hadn't been able to do since January 31, 2009, when he woke up in the back of a Jeep unable to remember anything after 1994.

He was later diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Dissociative Amnesia, which caused him to lose more than a decade of his life - including all of his memories of his family.

"I've got basically an entire career that I know nothing about. I've got people that walk up to me - Marines that walk up to me - and talk to me about how I saved their lives, or how I worked with them, or how I helped them over in Iraq. I don't know who they are," Navy Petty Officer Second Class Buf Kloppenborg said. "I've got an entire family - an ex-wife and four kids - that I know nothing about. I don't even remember dating my ex-wife."

"I've been through a lot of downs and very few ups," he added. "Sally was my biggest up."

Sally is Kloppenborg's service dog, a yellow Labrador Retriever. She's also one of his best friends, a constant companion, and as far as he's concerned, his saving grace.

"Before I got Sally, I was doing all my shopping at the gas station because I couldn't go into grocery stores," Buf Kloppenborg, HM2, USN, (ret.)

"She's my battle buddy," he said. "I've come to basically put my life in her hands."

Sally's not the kind of service dog one usually thinks of, though - she's a Psychiatric Service Dog.

She probably could be trained to get stuff out of the fridge, but Buf is perfectly capable of doing that for himself. Actually, Sally's service to Buf is to make it possible for him to venture out to a real grocery store and get stuff to actually fill the fridge - something he hadn't been able to do in 18 months.

"Before I got Sally, I was doing all my shopping at a gas station because I couldn't go in grocery stores. [I] didn't feel comfortable at all going into grocery stores," or any other stores, Kloppenborg said. "There were too many people around me. I always felt on alert."

So for over a year he relegated his shopping to a nearby gas station. "There's not a lot of food and most of it's not that good for you anyway," he said.

Dr. Sarah Spar-Alexander, a clinical psychologist at Camp LeJeune's Deployment Wellness Center, has seen many cases of PTSD, but the amnesia has complicated Kloppenborg's treatment.

"If you look at Buf's medical record he had some pretty nasty PTSD," she said,



Photo courtesy of paws4vets.

Navy Petty Officer Second Class Buf Kloppenborg with his Psychiatric Service Dog; SALLY, training on the campus of the University of North Carolina Wilmington

speaking with Kloppenborg's permission. "In fact, one of the clinicians that evaluated him said this is one of the worst cases of PTSD [they'd] seen.

"Buf doesn't remember that," she added. "He doesn't remember his PTSD symptoms."

Kloppenborg enlisted in the Navy in 1989 and served a tour in Kuwait during the Gulf War before getting out in 1993. He re-enlisted in 2000 and spent three more combat tours in Iraq patching up the Marines he served alongside as a hospital corpsman. The last tour ended in November 2008.

Two months later, he couldn't remember a bit of it. Spar-Alexander said the amnesia isn't abnormal for a period of two or three weeks, but Kloppenborg's case is very unusual.

"The first six months or so we were kind of working on how to get his memories back, but those attempts really weren't working," Spar-Alexander said. "At this point he's kind of thinking, 'Maybe I don't want them to come back. If they were so bad I lost 14 years, maybe I really don't want them.'

"We've been working on what's next, how to move on with life. What's the next year going to look like for him? How can he make meaning of his life even without these 14 years," she added.

But getting Kloppenborg to that point wasn't easy. He, like many others with PTSD, suffered from avoidance issues—hence his shopping for food at the gas station where there were few, if any, other shoppers.

Women and children also are a source of anxiety for him.

"We don't know why," Spar-Alexander said. "There could have been some trauma related to that while he was deployed that he doesn't remember.

"My being a female therapist, it took him probably at least two months to not shake in my presence," she said. "He would visibly shake and sweat. His face would turn bright red."

Touching or being touched causes a distinct and severe reaction, as well. A friendly pat on the back can send him into muscle spasms or an anxiety attack. And with a heightened startle response, a friendly tap on the shoulder once earned the tapper a solid punch.

"I was very thankful that it was a retired Marine that actually ended up being one of my old sergeant majors," Kloppenborg said.

In July or August 2009, about seven months into Kloppenborg's treatment, traditional techniques were proving fruitless. That's when a service dog was suggested.

"In my relaxation group we did a 'Dog Day,' where several service members brought their animals in and we met at the park," Spar-Alexander said. "There was this puppy... she was just sitting on Buf's lap for like an hour and she fell asleep.

"It's the first time any of us had seen him smile," she added. "That had to be, gosh, [a year] ago."

Enter Sally

Sally is calm—and calming. She's trained to sit behind Kloppenborg in crowded areas and alert him with a nudge or a bark if someone gets too close. She has given him his life back. Kloppenborg now shops in regular grocery stores and has even ventured out to restaurants where he has been able to sit with his back to the rest of the dining room because he knows Sally won't let anyone startle him.

"I trust that she's not going to let anybody get near me," he said. "Being a corpsman, my biggest fear is hurting people. I like to try to help, but with the startle response I've got, having her watching my back and making sure that nobody walks up behind me, and causes me to react."

And when his anxiety level starts to rise, Sally will put her head on his lap and nudge him until he starts petting her. It's just to let him know, "Hey, I'm here for you."

Spar-Alexander is amazed at the progress Kloppenborg has made since getting



HM2 Kloppenborg with his Psychiatric Service Dog; SALLY, training at Marine Base Camp LeJeune

Sally. He talks easily with the women in her office, he can go to stores and restaurants, and he jokes and he smiles.

"As his treating psychologist, I would say Sally has been the most influential treatment technique or treatment provider that Buf has had, and I have no qualms about saying that," Spar-Alexander said. "She's made more difference than any other type of treatment technique or any other thing that we can throw at him."

The benefit of Psychiatric Service Dogs in the treatment of PTSD is slowly becoming accepted. Spar-Alexander said many of those that come into the Camp Lejeune Deployment Wellness Center have service dogs. And there are plenty more making the same difference for other veterans with PTSD. Many of them come from paws4vets, part of the Round Hill, Virginia-based nonprofit organization, paws4people.

Paws4vets provides Psychiatric Service Dogs, like Sally, to service members with PTSD. In fact, Sally is one of the program's stars.

She, like all other paws4vets dogs, was trained at one of the five federal prisons that host the paws4prisons program, a part of paws4people's training program. How long a dog spends in the prison program depends on the dog and the skill set required, Terry Henry, director of paws4vets, said.

Puppies begin training between three- and eight-weeks-old, Henry said. The puppies spend the next 15 months to a year in one of the five prison programs. Each prison trains a different skill set.

"Then we do what we call a 'bump,' where we bump the future client against the dog to see if the dog bonds [with] and wants to work for that person," Henry said, explaining the introduction process. "We strongly believe the dog picks the person and you've really got to pay attention to that.

"They're going to work for them day-in and day-out for the next eight to 10 years, so they do sort of need to like that person," he added.

After that, it's back to school for the puppy with the doggie equivalent of the military's AIT - Advanced Individual Training.

Henry says the key to paws4vets success is how early they get the service member working with a dog. In fact, the program's first interaction with a troop with post traumatic stress is while they're still in their first one or two stages of recovery versus waiting until they've completed years of conventional treatment.

"We do it early. We have a medical team and volunteers inside of our organization - nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers - and they team with the veterans' or active-duty service members' treatment team," Henry said. "[That way] our operational dog-training teams don't do anything stupid or press them too far or stress them too much, but [yet] stress them enough where they can overcome agoraphobia, panic attacks, all that good kind of stuff in four or five or six months versus three or four years and come off their medicine like you wouldn't believe."

Coming off the drugs is actually one of the requirements to being able to train with the service dog, he said. The service members have to make an effort to get off their medications. Some are on more than 10 drug combinations.

It's done with doctor supervision and approval, but Henry said it works.

"None of the clinicians want to keep these guys on eight, 10, 12, 13 different drug combinations for the rest of their lives," he said. "It's to manage getting them through to the hopeful outcomes of the therapy they're going through.



USO Photo by Samantha Quigley

A future Service Dog puppy rests his weary head after a day of playing and training.

"We basically found that you can't [work] with them when they're on that many drugs and we actually use the dog as motivation for their treatment team to try to start reducing or eliminating drugs sets by saying, 'OK. The next three weeks, you need to get through your therapy, you need to go to your groups and your individual [sessions], you need to work with your doctors to reduce your drugs or eliminate a drug,'" Henry said. "Do that, three weeks from now you can come back and do your next training session with your dog."

And it's working, he said, adding this strategy has taken service members with PTSD who were on a high number of drugs to help them manage symptoms down to just one or two - maybe three if you count the vitamin "K-9" they keep on hand.

It seems the military thinks it's worth trying as well. Earlier this year, paws4vets was asked to start working directly with the Warrior Transition Unit at Fort Stewart, Georgia.

A couple of soldiers from the unit have been chosen - three that live in the trailer with the dogs and another six to eight that come on a daily basis to help out - to care for the three or four dogs that are there at any one time. Paws4vets staff visits regularly and trains the soldiers on how to train the dogs and do what they call "public access."

"It gives the soldiers [working with the dogs] something functional and important to do other than sit in their room, stare at the wall, watch TV, and play video games because they don't have any other duties except to go to their medical appointments," Henry said.

This strategy is working, too. "We have one soldier in the program - he's a specialist - who a couple months before we started, had such extreme anger management issues that they were affecting his life personally and professionally, and causing confrontations with law enforcement.

"He's been in the program since we started in March and his case managers are in awe because now, all the sudden, he's so friendly. He hasn't had one anger management problem. He loves the dogs," Henry said. "He will go out on training sessions with us and he's interacting with the public and smiling all the time. He'll tell you, 'If it wasn't for this program, and these dogs, I'd still wouldn't be able to control my anger.'"

Paws4vets has recently been invited to start the same type of program at Camp Lejeune.

While the price tag for training these dogs is as much as a nice car - \$30,000 to \$35,000 - it's covered by private donations, Henry said. The veterans or service members receiving a paws4vets Psychiatric Service Dog pay nothing, though they are asked to spread the word about the program.

Paws4vets placed its first service dog in January, 2010. They're now up to eight dogs and their client list is growing.

"They'll tell you, 'They saved our lives. I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't for my dog,'" Henry said. "The dog becomes their life ring, their protector, their guardian angel - whatever you want to call it - so that they can go out and function."

If Sally's effect on Kloppenborg is indicative what service dogs can do for those with PTSD, Spar-Alexander might soon be considering a different field of psychology.

"It's really quite amazing," she said. "We joke that [with all] our years of education, 's running loops around us!" ★

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Samantha L. Quigley is the senior editor of ON ★ PATROL.

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For more information about or to HELP paws4vets, or it parent organization paws4people, please visit:

www.paws4people.org or www.paws4vets.org.

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"helping paw" to America's
Service Members & Veterans**

For more information about our Psychiatric, Mobility and Seizure Response Service Dogs, our Wounded Warriors programs or to help, please contact us.

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 (Right): WYATT is our Chief Trainer's personal Demo Dog and Ambassador, he travels everywhere and helps train just about every client. WYATT is a Certified Psychiatric Service Dog.
Photo courtesy of Joan Brady.

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